

SHORT COMMUNICATION

The use of complementary medicines by those with asthma

M.R. PARTRIDGE, M. DOCKRELL AND N.M. SMITH

The National Asthma Campaign, Providence House, Providence Place, London, U.K.

Abstract Complementary therapies attract considerable media attention and previous surveys of members of an asthma patient organisation suggested that their use by those with asthma was commonplace. This report concerns a study of a stratified cross section of the asthma population designed to give a more representative insight into current usage of complementary therapies. A sift questionnaire was used to identify those with asthma and 785 of those so identified undertook a semi-structured face-to-face interview. Only 6% of the study population were current users of complementary therapies with use being more common amongst those who expressed most concern regarding their current medication. Low use of complementary therapies may well reflect satisfaction with current management and suggests that previous surveys may have been unrepresentative of a more balanced population of those with asthma.

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INTRODUCTION

Five million people have asthma in the U.K.; 150 million globally. Excellent treatments are available but patients often fail to benefit from them and have been reported to express disquiet at the regular use of medication and use of steroids whether inhaled or tablets (1). As a result, those with asthma might seek alternatives. In 1997, a survey of members of the National Asthma Campaign revealed that a third of responding carers of children with asthma stated that they had used complementary therapies for their childhood asthma (2). This prevalence of usage is in line with reports from the United States (3) but may have been biased by the fact that respondents were members of a patient support organisation. To obtain a representative picture of the needs of people with asthma, the National Asthma Campaign has undertaken a further survey designed to be representative of those with asthma of all ages across the U.K. The methodology has been reported in full elsewhere (4). A short self-completion questionnaire was posted to 15 000 house-

holds within 100 representative postal districts. The questionnaire asked whether a doctor had ever diagnosed anyone in the household as having asthma, and for each individual so diagnosed follow-up questions evaluated age at diagnosis, medication and severity. Completed questionnaires were received from 6103 households (a response rate of 41%), and the sift questionnaire identified 2403 individuals with doctor-diagnosed asthma, of whom 598 were unwilling to be followed up. One thousand and seven hundred and forty individuals were identified as the survey population and all were approached for a face-to-face interview in their own home and 785 interviews were achieved. The total was divided between 560 adults with asthma (16 years or older), 48 children aged 12–15 years interviewed in the presence of a parent or guardian, and 177 younger children, for whom the parent was interviewed. Asthma severity was graded according to frequency and impact of symptoms, and a clinical measure which was based upon an approximation to the treatment steps recommended in the British Thoracic Society (BTS) asthma guidelines (5). One-third of the study population were classified as having severe or moderately severe asthma and two-thirds were prescribed inhaled steroids (BTS guideline step 2 or above), and 53 (7%) were prescribed steroid tablets (step 5). The mean length of the interview was

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Correspondence should be addressed to: Prof. Martyn R Partridge, Faculty of Medicine (NHLI Division), Imperial College, London, Charing Cross Hospital Campus, St Dunstons Road, London W6 8RP, U.K. Fax: +44 (0)20 8846 7999; E-mail: m.r.partridge@ic.ac.uk

TABLE I. Awareness and use of complementary medicines by those with asthma

Alternative medicine/complementary therapy	Aware (%)	Ever used (%)	Currently use (%)
Breathing techniques	(325) 41%	(42) 5%	(24) 3%
Herbal medicine	(180) 23%	(26) 3%	(7) 1%
Yoga	(150) 19%	(7) 1%	(4) 1%
Aromatherapy	(142) 18%	(27) 3%	(17) 2%
Homeopathy	(141) 18%	(16) 2%	(2) ^a
Acupuncture	(128) 16%	(8) 1%	(0) 0%
Hypnosis	(82) 10%	(1) ^a	(0) 0%
Reflexology	(72) 9%	(9) 1%	(5) 1%
Chiropractor	(21) 3%	(2) ^a	(1) ^a
Osteopathy	(19) 2%	(2) ^a	(0) 0%
None	(324) 41%	(686) 87%	(738) 94%

Base: all respondents (*n* = 785)

Note that respondents (*n*=785) could give more than one reply to each question, so totals add to more than 100%.

^aless than 1%.

around 75 min. Thirteen questions in the survey related to complementary therapies and views regarding medication, and the response to these questions forms the basis of this report.

RESULTS

Three hundred and twenty-four respondents (41%) were not aware of any of the complementary or alternative therapies asked about. A further 262 respondents (33%) were aware of such interventions, but had never considered using them. One hundred respondents (13%) had considered their use but had never actually done so. Fifty-two of those interviewed (7%) had tried complementary therapies in the past but were not using them currently, and only 47 (6%) were current users. The types of alternative therapies known about or used are shown in Table I.

When those with asthma were asked to express concerns regarding possible side-effects or long-term effects of steroids, or to comment on their feelings about being reliant on medicines, or asked to express concerns regarding side-effects or long-term effects of other drugs, 279 respondents (36%) had concerns about all three of those issues, 143 (18%) had concerns regarding two of the issues, and 100 respondents (13%) had concerns about one of those issues. One-third of the respondents (263) had no stated medication worries. Adding together the results of those who were currently using complementary or alternative therapies, and those who had previously used them showed that 47 of the patients (17%) who were most worried about medication (i.e. had all three worries) had tried alternatives, compared with 23 (9%) of those who expressed no concerns regarding medication (*t*-test for proportions, *P* < 0.01). The 100 respondents who had considered but not actually used al-

ternatives were asked to say in their own words why that was the case. Many were simply unable to give a particular reason (22) (22%) or admitted that they had simply not got round to trying any other approach (19) (19%). Others felt that there was little need to do so, either because their asthma was well controlled (15) (15%), because it simply was not that bad (13) (13%), or because conventional prescription medicines worked well (8) (8%). Those expressing barriers to use of alternatives mentioned potential costs (10) (10%) or doubts about their efficacy (6) (6%) or availability (6) (6%).

DISCUSSION

That only 6% of a stratified group of those with asthma were using complementary therapies is less than that might be expected given the attention devoted to this topic by the media, and suggests that our previous survey of members of the National Asthma Campaign was a non-representative sample. Low usage could reflect satisfaction with conventional therapy and the results show higher levels of use of complementary treatments in those expressing more concern regarding their medical treatment. Our survey also revealed encouragingly high satisfaction scores related to use of health service resources (6) and others have shown that a powerful driver towards use of complementary medicine is dissatisfaction with orthodox practitioners (7). Unsurprisingly, the alternatives of which those with asthma were aware, were those having a high media profile at the time, especially breathing techniques, and less commonly herbal medicine, yoga, aromatherapy, homeopathy or acupuncture. In conclusion, whilst a previous study of members of an asthma patient support association had suggested high usage of complementary therapy, study of a more "typical" population of those with asthma revealed low

rates of usage, with a bias towards use by those expressing concerns regarding conventional medication. Facilitating patient's expression of concerns re-medication and the eliciting and addressing of fears has been suggested as a cardinal part of good asthma management (8).

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